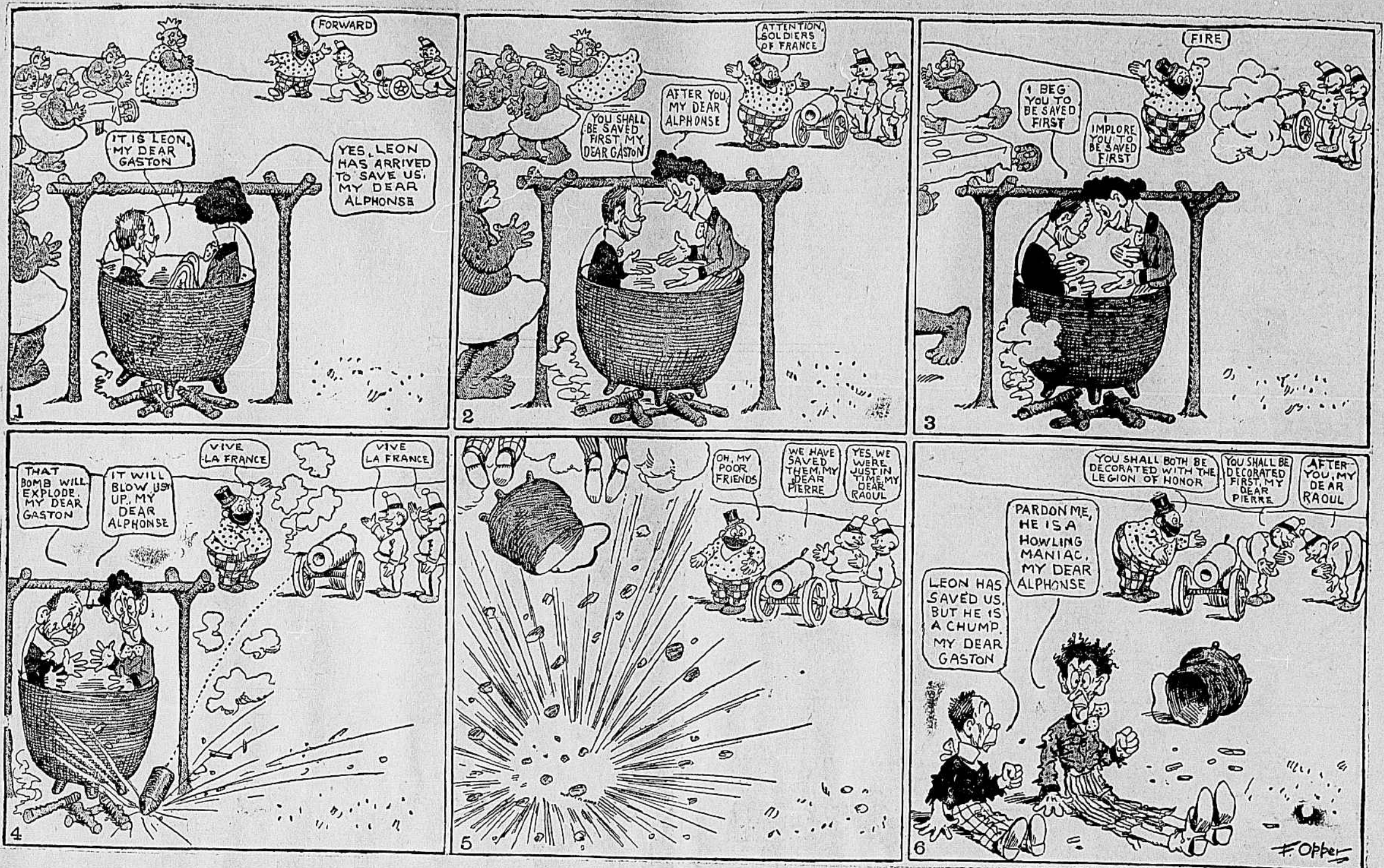


Alphonse and Gaston In Africa.

A Thrilling Tale of Heroism, Hairbreadth Escapes and Politeness. (No. 3.)

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS INSTALLMENTS: Alphonse and Gaston were captured by the cannibals and the savage queen offered to marry either one of them. Alack and alas they bowed so long to each other, each urging the other to accept the honor, that the queen became enraged and ordered them to be boiled and served for dinner.

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THE SEVEN SECRETS

by WM. L. QUELX

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CHAPTER XXIX.

The Police Are At Fault.

AMBLER JEVONS read the letter, then handed it to me without comment. It was written upon the note paper I knew so well, stamped with the neat address "Neneford" in black, but it bore no date. What I read was as follows:—"Sir, I fail to comprehend the meaning of your words when you followed me into the train at Huntingdon last night. I am in no fear of any catastrophe; therefore, I can only take your offer of assistance as an attempt to obtain money from me. If you presume to address me again I shall have no other course than to acquaint the police. Yours truly, Mary Courtney."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "Then he warned her, and she misunderstood his intention."

"Without a doubt," said Ambler, taking the letter from my hand. "This was written probably only a few days before her death. That man," and he glanced at the prostrate body, "was the only one who could give us the clue to unravel the mystery."

But the dead man's lips had closed, and his secret was held forever. Only those letters remained to connect him with the river tragedy, or rather to show that he had communicated with the unfortunate Mrs. Courtney.

In company we walked to Leman Street Police Station, one of the chief centers of the Metropolitan Police in the East End, and there, in an upper office, Ambler had a long consultation with the sergeant of the Criminal Investigation Department on duty.

I described the appearance of the body, and stated my suspicions of poisoning, all of which the detective carefully noted before going forth to make his own examination. My address was taken so that I might assist at the post-mortem, and then shortly after midnight I drove back westward through the city with Ambler at my side.

He spoke little and when in Oxford Street, just at the corner of Newman Street, he descended, wished me a hurried good-night, and disappeared in the darkness. He was often given to strange vagaries of erratic movement, as though some thought had suddenly occurred to him, and he acted at once upon it.

That night I scarcely closed my eyes. My brain was whirled with thought of all the curious events of the past few months, the inexplicable presence of old Mr. Courtney, the subsequent death of Mary

and the only man, who, according to Ambler, knew the secret.

Ethelwynn's strange words worried me. What could she mean? What did she know? Surely her's could not be a guilty conscience. Yet, in her words and actions I had detected that cowardice which a heavy conscience always engenders. One by one I dissected and analyzed the Seven Secrets, but not in one single instance could I obtain a gleam of truth.

While at the hospital next day I was served with a notice to assist at the post-mortem of the unfortunate Lane, whose body was lying in the Shadwell mortuary; and that same afternoon I met by appointment Doctor Tatham, of the London Hospital, who, as is well known, is an expert toxicologist.

To describe in technical detail the examination we made would not interest the general reader of this strange narrative. The average man or woman knows nothing or cares less for the duodenal or the pylorus; therefore it is not my intention to go into long and wearying detail. Suffice it to say that we preserved certain portions of the body for subsequent examination, and together we engaged the whole evening in the laboratory of the hospital. Tatham was well skilled in the minutiae of the tests. The exact determination of the cause of death in cases of poisoning always depends partly on the symptoms noted before death and partly on the appearances found after death. Regarding the former neither of us knew anything; hence our difficulties were greatly increased. The object of the analyst is to obtain the substances which he has to examine chemically in as pure a condition as possible, so that there may be no doubt about the results of his testing; also, of course, to separate active substances from those that are inert, all being mixed together in the stomach and alimentary canal. Again, in dealing with such fluids as the blood, or the tissues of the body, their natural constituents must be got rid of before the foreign and poisonous body can be reached. There is still difficulty further to contend with; that some of the most poisonous of substances are of unstable composition and are readily altered by chemical reagents; to this group belong many vegetable and most animal poisons. These, therefore, must be treated differently from the more stable inorganic poisons we may destroy all organic materials mixed with it, trusting to find the poison still recognizable after this process; not so with an organic substance; that must be separated by other than destructive means.

Through the whole evening we tested for the various groups of poisons—

rosives, simple irritants, specific irritants and neurotics. It was a long and scientific search.

Some of the tests with which I was not acquainted I watched with the keenest interest, for of all the medical men in London Tatham was the most up-to-date in such analyses.

At length, after much work with acids, filtration and distillation, we determined that a neurotic had been employed, and that its action on the vasomotor system of the nerves was very similar, it not identical, with nitrate of amyl.

Further than that even Tatham, expert in such matters, could not pro-

ceed. Hours of hard work resulted in that conclusion, and with it we were compelled to be satisfied.

In due course the inquest was held at Shadwell, and, with Ambler, I attended as a witness. The reporters, of course expected a sensation; but, on the contrary, our evidence went to show that as the poisonous substance was found in the "quarters" bottle on deceased's table, death was in all probability due to suicide.

Some members of the jury took an opposite view. Then the letters we had found concealed were produced by the police, and, of course, created a certain

amount of interest. But to the readers of newspapers the poisoning of a cook-monger at Shadwell is of little interest as compared with a similar catastrophe in the quarter of London vaguely known as the West End. The letters were suspicious, and both coroner and jury accepted them as evidence that Lane was engaged upon an elaborate piece of blackmail.

"Who is this Mary Courtney," writes to him from Neneford?" inquired the coroner of the inspector.

"Well, sir," the latter responded, "the writer herself is dead. She was drowned a few days ago near her home

under suspicious circumstances."

Then to the fact that something extraordinary was underlying the inquiry—"Ah!" remarked the coroner, one of the most acute officials of his class. "Then in face of this letter seems to be more than curious. For ought we know the tragedy at Neneford may have been a willful murder; and we have now the suicide of the assassin."

"That, sir, is the police theory," replied the inspector.

"Police theory be hanged!" ejaculated Ambler, almost loud enough to be heard, and will never learn anything. If the jury are content to accept such an explanation, and brand poor Lane as a murderer, they must be allowed to do so."

I knew Jevons held coroner's juries in the most supreme contempt; sometimes rather unreasonably so, I thought.

"Well," the coroner said, "this is certainly remarkable evidence," and he turned the dead woman's letter over in his hand. "It is quite plain that the deceased approached the lady ostensibly to give her warning of some danger, but really to blackmail her. For what reason does not at present appear. He may have feared her threat to give information to the police; hence his crime and subsequent suicide."

"Listen," exclaimed Jevons in my ear. "They are actually trying the dead man for a crime he could not possibly have committed. They've got hold of the wrong end of the stick as usual. Why don't they give a verdict of suicide and have done with it. We can't afford to waste a whole day explaining theories to a set of uneducated gentlemen of the White-chapel Road. The English law is ridiculous where coroner's juries are concerned."

The coroner heard his whispering and looked toward us severely.

"We have not had sufficient time to investigate the whole of the facts connected with Mrs. Courtney's mysterious death," the inspector went on. "You will probably recollect, sir, a mystery down at Kew some little time ago. It was fully reported in the papers, and created considerable sensation—an old gentleman was murdered under remarkable circumstances. Well, sir, the gentleman in question was Mrs. Courtney's husband."

The coroner sat back in his chair, and stared at the officer who had spoken while in the court a great sensation was caused. Mention of the Kew mystery brought its details vivify back to the minds of every one. Yes, after all, the death of that poor cook-monger, Lanky Lane, was of greater public interest than the representatives of the press anticipated.

"Are you quite certain of this?" the coroner queried.

"Yes, sir, I am here by direction of the Chief Inspector at Scotland Yard to give evidence. I was engaged upon the case at Kew, and have also made inquiries into the mystery at Neneford."

"Then you have suspicion that the deceased was well, a person of bad character?"

"We have."

"Fools!" growled Ambler. "Lane was one of their informers, and often obtained payment from Scotland Yard for information regarding the doings of a certain gang of thieves. And yet they actually declare him to be a bad character. Preposterous!"

"Do you apply for an adjournment of the inquiry?"

"No, sir. We anticipate that the verdict will be suicide—the only one possible in face of the evidence."

And then, as though the jury were compelled to act upon the inspector's suggestion, they returned a simple verdict: "That the deceased committed suicide by poisoning while of unsound mind."

CHAPTER XXX.

Sir Bernhard's Decision.

For fully a week I saw nothing of Ambler.

Sir Bernhard was unwell, and remained down at Hove; therefore, I was compelled to attend to his practice. There were several serious cases, the patients being people of note; thus I was kept very busy.

My friend's silence was puzzling. I wrote to him but received no response. A wire to his office in the city elicited the fact that Mr. Jevons was out of town. Probably he was still pursuing the inquiry he had so actively taken up. Nevertheless, I was dissatisfied that he should leave me so entirely in the dark as to his intentions and discoveries.

Ethelwynn came to town for the day, and I spent several hours shopping with her. She was strangely nervous, and all the old spontaneous gaiety seemed to have left her. She had read in the papers of the curious connection between the death of the man Lane and that of her unfortunate sister, and our conversation was mainly upon the river mystery. Sometimes she seemed ill at ease with me, as though she feared some discovery. Perhaps, however, it was merely my fancy.

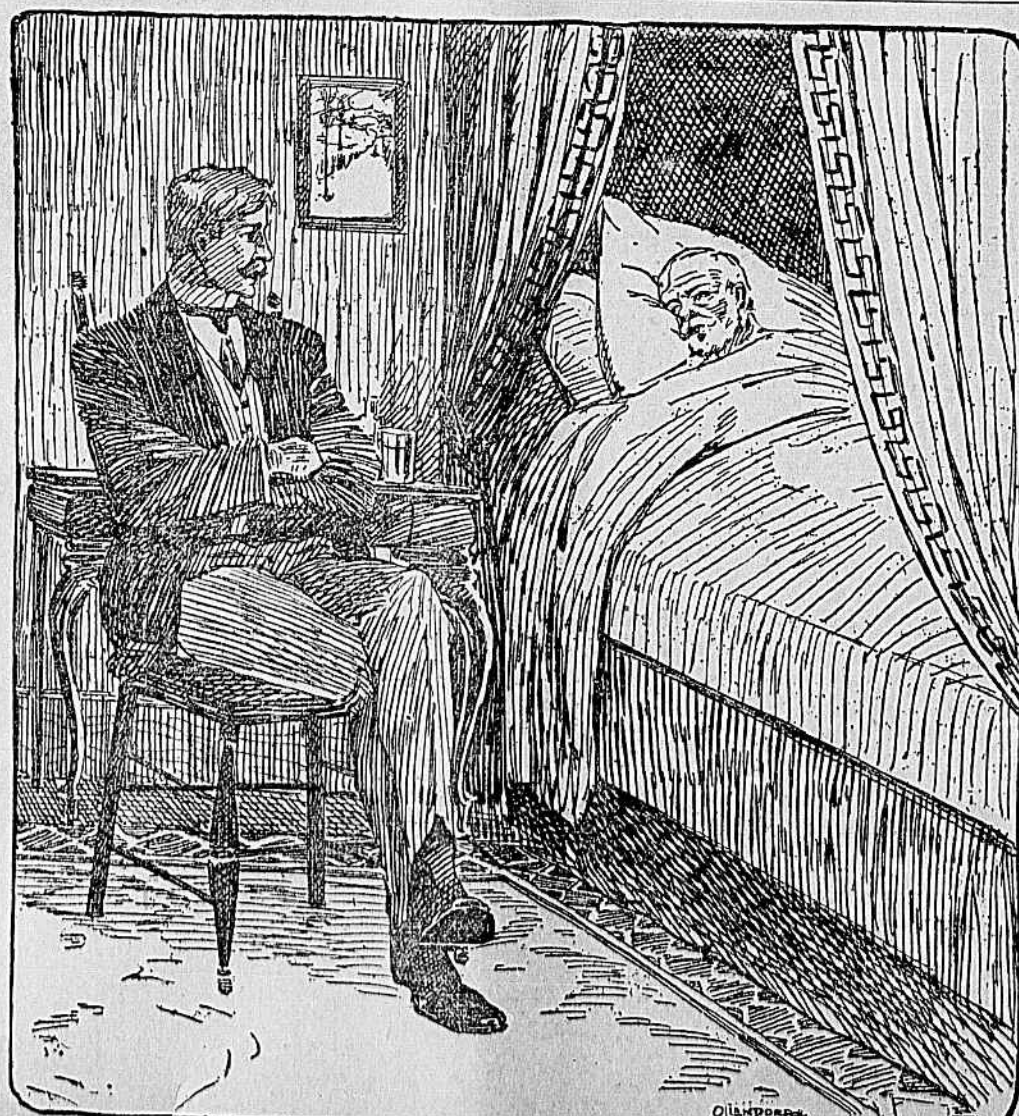
I loved her. She was all the world to me, and yet in her eyes I seemed to read some hidden secret which she was endeavoring with all the power at her command to conceal. In such circumstances there was bound to arise between us a certain reserve that we had not before known. Her conversation was carried on in a mechanical manner, as though distracted by her inner thoughts; and when, after having tea together in Bond Street, we drove to the station, and I saw her off on her return to Neneford, my mind was full of dark apprehensions.

Yes, that interview convinced me more than ever that she was in some manner cognizant of the truth. The secret existence of old Mr. Courtney, the man whom I myself had pronounced dead, was the crowning point of the strange affair; and yet I felt by some inward intuition that this fact was not unknown to her.

All the remarkable events of that moonlit night when I had followed husband and wife along the river bank came back to me, and I saw vividly the old man's face, haggard and drawn, just as it had been in life. Surely there could be no stranger current of events than those which formed the Seven Secrets. They were beyond explanation—all of them. I knew nothing. I had seen results, but I knew not their cause.

Nitrate of amyl was not a drug which a cook-monger would select with a view to committing suicide. Indeed, I saw a few of my readers, unless they were doctors or chemists, have ever heard of it. Therefore my own conclusion, fully endorsed by the erratic

(Continued on Eleventh Page)



"When I give up you shall step into my shoes, Boyd, and it will be a good thing for you."